



Monika Swasti Winarnita

Dancing the Feminine: Gender and Identity Performances by Indonesian Migrant Women

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reviewed by [Ariane Utomo](#)

1. Marriage migration has gained increasing attention across the many disciplines of social science in recent years. Within the discipline of demography, the rising volume of Asian cross-border marriage migrations has sparked a growing scholarship on this topic since the mid-2000s. Social demographers have much to gain from the wealth of anthropological literature on marriage migration. Insights on how the intersections of race, class and gender affect the lives of marriage migrants are often difficult to canvass from population surveys and census data—the primary tools of analysis in our field. With this intention of exploring the study of marriage migration beyond the discipline of demography, I read Monika Winarnita's ethnographic work on a group of Indonesian migrant women dancers in Perth, Australia.
2. *Dancing the Feminine* takes an original approach to study the lives of Indonesian female marriage migrants in Perth who were, at the time of the Winarnita's study, members of a cultural dance performance group. Winarnita's ethnography explicates the experience of the women, as dancers, and as members of a population sub-group who occupied a rather marginal position in diasporic politics in Perth. Owing to its geographical proximity to Asia, and the nature of the city's mining-centred growth, Perth hosts a relatively large number of Asian marriage migrants. Winarnita suggests that negative constructions around Asian women with Anglo-Australian husbands were more pervasive in Perth than in any other parts of Australia. Indonesian female marriage migrants who married Australian men working in the mining industry are typically seen as 'economically well-off and have middle-class lifestyles.' However, at the same time, they were typecast—by others in the community—as 'not necessarily hav[ing] social and cultural capital' (p. 3).
3. Indeed, stigmatisation of Asian women in interracial relationships is a ubiquitous phenomenon, and can partly explain the nature of marriage migrant's marginalisation—as a group—in a given community. From mail-order brides, bar girls, to gold diggers, the prevailing stereotypes of Asian marriage migrants can be all sexist, racist and classist at the same time.^[1] Such stereotypes are pervasive across both their host communities and the women's sending communities. In the case of the Indonesian migrant dancers in Perth, stereotypes about marriage migrants affect their standing as bonafide Indonesian cultural performers. While the women were keen dancers, and some had actually been trained in classical regional dances in Indonesia, they were often labelled—as a group—as amateurs and inauthentic representatives of Indonesian cultures by the members of various

Indonesian communities in Perth.

4. Winarnita's ethnographic account centres on her joining this particular dance group in 2007, and her participation in the group's 28 performances across public events held between 2007 and 2011. The book is organised into seven chapters, providing a nuanced analysis on multiple sub-themes arising from its theoretical foci: gender, migration, sexuality and relational identities within a migrant community.
5. In the Introductory chapter, Winarnita outlines the central theoretical framework of *Dancing the Feminine*. Here, she draws upon an intersection between the scholarship of marriage migration, and the literature on migrant's cultural performance. The first chapter further provides accounts of her research methods, and a contextual background of the Indonesian diaspora in Perth. The next five chapters are organised on multiple themes built around specific events in the dancing group's performance timeline.
6. In Chapter 1, Winarnita dwells on the question of authenticity in cultural representation. Who has the right to represent a nation in a cultural performance? Who has the authority to define what is an authentic cultural performance? What does this say about the nature of social stratification within a migrant group? Three case studies in Chapter 1 are centred on the dancers' negotiation with what Winarnita positioned as a 'structuring discourse of authenticity' (p. 29) in the Perth Indonesian community. In Chapter 2, Winarnita continues discussing contestations around the authenticity of a cultural performance, focusing on gender- and community-prescribed notions of femininity. Chapter 3 extends the discussion on these prevailing discourses of femininity, and uses an example of *aging* dancers who switched to performing male roles and succeeded in gaining community approval as successful performers. Chapter 4 takes a study of an Ondel-Ondel performance—a Betawi syncretic Chinese dance to examine Chinese-Indonesian belonging in the diaspora. Chapter 5 juxtaposed 'hybrid' and 'authentic' representations of the Balinese version of the Hindu Ramayana epic and Chapter 6 provides the conclusion to this ethnography.
7. As a reader, I valued how Winarnita carefully outlined her positioning as a partial insider early in the book. Winarnita shared many commonalities with the women in her research: being Indonesian, married to a 'white' Australian, having kids of mixed heritage, and being an amateur dancer—like approximately half the 40 dancers that she got to know in the research process (pp. 5–7). Winarnita reflects how having this emic–etic positioning, as a member of the performing troupe, and as a cultural insider in the Indonesia–Australia space, would bring its own benefits and challenges to the research.
8. As an Indonesian living in Australia, I can see that there is indeed a methodological merit in having an emic perspective in marriage migration research. Such merit was evident, for example, when Winarnita talked about concepts and experiences of shame (*malu vis-à-vis malu-maluin*): being deeply embarrassed when things go wrong during a public performance, when you failed to move in-synch with the rest of group, when the accompanying music had a false start, when the audience gave you a cold reception, when the MC mistakenly pronounced the title of your dance from Wind to Dog. Understanding these nuances to do with 'losing face' would require both the researcher's active participation on stage as a performer, as well as a deeply embedded collective identity as a member of the diaspora.
9. By weaving in her partial insider perspectives into dance performance-centred narratives throughout the book, Winarnita effectively teased out the subtlety of relational identities and belonging within a migrant group. This idea of substratification, in my view, would be the strongest contribution of Winarnita's ethnography to the multidisciplinary field of migration. Winarnita introduced her proposed typography of Indonesian (women's) communities in Perth in her introductory chapter. On the very

top, Winarnita proposed, were the Dharma Wanita committee members. These would be the spouses of the Indonesian consulate in Perth: the symbol of respectable modern women, and gatekeepers of culture and femininity. On the second layer were Indonesian women married to Indonesian men. On the last tier were the marriage migrants, stereotyped as Indonesian women who *married up* to 'white' Australian men (p. 19). She further elaborated about how among marriage migrants, there are further sub-divisions based on class, education, ethnicity and religion. Winarnita further argues that 'it is this very typology that functions as a normative device for Indonesians in Australia [and] is what the female marriage migrant dancers try to subvert' (p. 29).

10. In this particular study, it seems that the centrality of Dharma Wanita's women and the Consulate has much to do with their position as the patron of Indonesian culture and arts in Perth. The dancers have a particular interest in making sure that their performance as female dancers would fit the mould of certain ideals of femininity; that their performance is valued by the Consulate; and that their group would be officially included as one of the Indonesian performance items in various events in Perth. I wonder whether Winarnita's proposed hierarchical typology would be agreed upon and/or equally sensed by most Indonesian marriage migrants in Perth. There may be other migrant groups who see little value in lining up for a patron-client relationship with the Indonesian Consulate. One may propose that instead, for the majority of marriage migrants, a more fitting model of stratification of their *sub*-groups in the diaspora would look like overlapping circles that have no clear hierarchical order.
11. While a fitting model of social stratification within a migrant group is likely to be context-dependent, Winarnita's study has challenged the perceptions of homogenous and *close-knit* migrant networks that often come up in popular discussions about migrant communities. Through studying dance performances, Winarnita's ethnography illustrates a social stratification system and its associated relational conflicts among members of the Indonesian community in Perth. Such findings support Ien Ang's proposition that, much like the way Ben Anderson characterised nations, diasporas are 'imagined communities.'^[2] On one hand, Indonesian migrant networks may provide the much-needed social capital for the dancers. On the other, the dancer's relative positioning and relational identities within these networks has important bearings to her sense of identity, acceptance and belonging in the community. Hence, as proposed by Ang, it is crucial 'to recognise the double-edgedness of diasporic identity: it can be the site of support and oppression, emancipation and confinement, solidarity and division.'^[3]
12. Something that I would like to see more in the book are longer direct quotes from interviews with her informants. For example, the discussion around self-exoticisation in the adaptation of a Balinese Ramayana performance in Chapter 5 would benefit from first-person narratives. Given the richness of her data, I am also eager to see several aspects of the study to be further developed in Winarnita's other or future work. In the book, the changing social status of dancers was discussed largely in the context of the Indonesian diasporic community, but not within the dyadic realm of a husband-wife relationship. It will be interesting to read how becoming a reputable performer of Indonesian dances would affect the power dynamics in an interracial marriage.
13. Beyond its contribution to the study of migrant cultural performance, *Dancing the Feminine* is a thought-provoking read for those interested in understanding how the intersections of race, class and gender may shape the lives of marriage migrants. To what extent does migration create new layers of stratification within a group of marriage migrants sharing a common country of origin? How can migration transform or amplify inherent class structures in a particular ethnic community? Does 'who you are married to' matter more than what you are? In other words, is it much more common to have numerous cliques of migrant women based on their spousal's occupations and racial categories—as opposed to other characteristics of the women's themselves? How do these layers of

in-group stratification affect marriage migrants' sense of identity, belonging and well-being? Research that delves into marginalised groups, relational identities and diasporic politics may incite some discomfort among involved parties within those particular migrant communities. I commend Winarnita for tackling such a sensitive subject with an intellectual rigour and innovative methodology, making this novel and insightful ethnography appealing to readers across the multidisciplinary fields of migration, gender, and Asian studies.

Notes

[1] See Kathryn Robinson, 'Of mail-order brides and "boys' own" tales: Representations of Asian-Australian marriages,' *Feminist Review* 52(1) (1996): 53–68; Pei-Chia Lan, 'Maid or madam? Filipina migrant workers and the continuity of domestic labor,' *Gender and Society* 17(2) (2003): 187 – 208; Nicole Piper and Mina Roces (eds), *Wife or Worker?: Asian Women and Migration*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004.

[2] Ien Ang, 'Together-in-difference: Beyond diaspora, into hybridity,' *Asian Studies Review*, 27(2) (2003): 141– 54.

[3] Ang, 'Together-in-difference,' p. 142.

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